

Miracles

The clinic is on the 8th floor of San Francisco General Hospital. To get there, take the train to the corner of 24th and Mission, and then walk 7 blocks north through the Mission District—past fruit stands, Mexican bakeries, Salvadorian restaurants, and farm workers' murals on abandoned buildings. At the hospital gates, go past the pastry cart and a woman with dreadlocks and multiple nose rings selling coffee to a line of people in all-night scrubs. Go around the usual chaos in the emergency room, up the elevators, and down the hall to the right.

There's no sign on the door or any windows. In the early morning, you might see a few women waiting by the door to the clinic, looking annoyed and lumpy in their scarves and jackets, but no other hint of what goes on inside. Press the intercom button, stand close to the video camera, and say your name. If you are on the list of patients, they will be let in. If not, they will probably let you in anyway; drop-ins are common here. There is no listing in the phone book, but word travels fast in the city. Women know where to go.

My 1st day at the clinic, I slip in behind a patient who has already gone through the intercom routine. A pretty black woman in scrubs notices me and asks with concern if I have an appointment.

"Um, no," I say, knowing that I look like just another lost young woman. "I'm the new medical student," I tell her, relieved that I am not a patient. The woman laughs and looks relieved, too.

"Oh. Well, you can come on back," she says. "I'm Diana, 1 of the counselors here. I've been here 20 years. We have a full schedule this morning."

This is the beginning of my 4 weeks at the Women's Options Center. The rest of the staff—black, white, Mexican American, and Salvadorian—are all women and all fiercely dedicated to their work. Even the translators who come in from other parts of the hospital seem to know that these patients need special care.

I meet patients who speak Russian, Mandarin, Arabic. One is a woman whose boyfriend had told her he had a vasectomy. Another was denied an abortion in Guatemala 20 years earlier and then raised the child of the stepfather who raped her. Another, a recovering addict, had cleaned up her life when she learned that she was pregnant, only to find out weeks later that the fetus had no kidneys. One woman had been to 2 other clinics, where the staff had tried to change her mind by telling her that abortions cause cancer.

I wonder what would happen to all these women if this clinic did not exist. With other clinics closing daily and the constant court battles reported in the newspaper, it seems a small miracle that it is still open.

One of the things I learn in my 4 weeks is how to

perform an abortion. I don't do it comfortably, or easily, or alone, but I know the steps.

Take the patient's history, perform a physical examination, and confirm the dating of the pregnancy sonographically. After a nurse administers fentanyl citrate and midazolam hydrochloride intravenously and a counselor explains the steps of the procedure, help the patient into the stirrups. Insert the speculum—"a little pressure," you say euphemistically. Administer an anesthetic agent on either side of the cervix, saying to expect "a little pinch."

Dilate the cervix using a thumb and forefinger to press the dilators through the os, feeling for the right kind of "give." Pass the vacuum tube, rotate it around the uterus to clear out its contents, and remove the tube. Go over the uterine walls with a curette; feeling the "grittiness" means the walls are clean. Examine the contents of the vacuum jar for the products of conception. This last step confirms that the procedure is complete and the patient can safely go home.

There is an eeriness to the last stage and a sense of something lost. It is the part, in fact, that I would rather not talk about because it seems like a betrayal. No matter how many times I perform these examinations, I never lose a sense of wonder at these small translucent beings on their way to the pathology laboratory. I can't help feeling as if I'm in the presence of a miracle.

On my last afternoon at the clinic, there is a baby shower for the clinic director, who is 8 months' pregnant and glowing. The waiting room is packed with counselors and nurses, cooing over each powder blue blanket and tiny pair of booties. It's a strange celebration for an abortion clinic, but for these women, the work of the clinic is about creating options for life, not death—and there's nothing better than new life, when it comes at the right time.

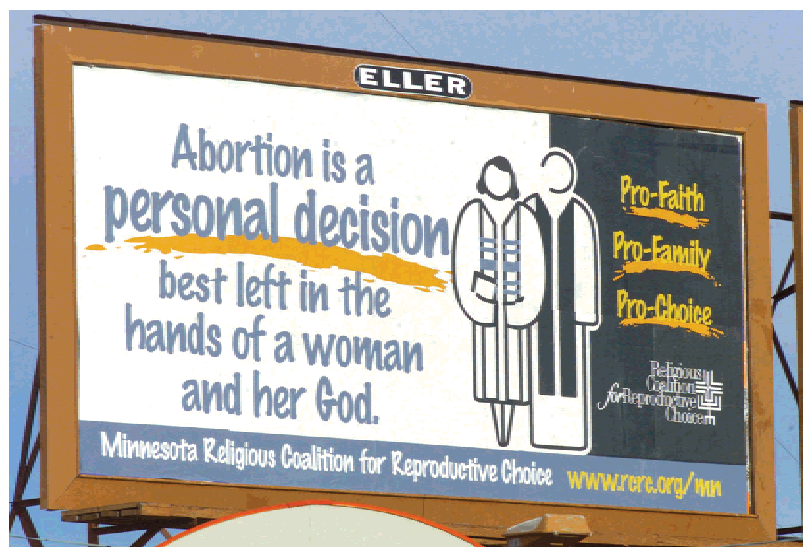
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This coalition of religions wants to expand women's reproductive choices